



Education Review

a journal of book reviews

Education Review (ISSN 1094-5296) publishes reviews of recent books in education, covering the entire range of education scholarship and practice.

The Education Review is made available to the public without cost as a service of the College of Education at Arizona State University.

Schmidt, Jeff. (2000) *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes their Lives*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield

Pp. 304

\$26.95 (Cloth) ISBN #0-8476-9364-3

Reviewed by Andi O'Connor
Ohio University

December 11, 2000

Disciplined Minds is a radical, disturbing, and provocative look at professional life. It offers a profound analysis of the personal struggles for identity and meaning in the lives of today's 21 million professionals. The book will shake up readers, particularly faculty members, graduate students, and others who participate in academic life.

This book represents critical theory in the best sense of the tradition: it is a well-written, compelling description of how graduate school, as well as professional training and practice, help reproduce social, political, and economic stratification. Luckily, this book also offers disheartened graduate students, soul-weary professors, and frustrated professionals a better understanding of the structural conditions that constrain their professional work, and ways to combat the conformity that is endemic to academic life.

Schmidt begins by discussing what he calls "widespread career burnout" among professionals—the chronic "workaholism," fatigue, isolation and depression common among many professionals today. "Professionals," he writes, "are not happy campers ... Ironically, such depression is most likely to hit the most devoted professionals—those who have been the most deeply involved with their work. You can't burn out if you've never been on fire" (pp. 1-2). The hidden root of this burnout and depression, Schmidt contends, is the professional's lack of

political control over his or her creative work. In addition, the dissonance between the early goals of many professionals (e.g., to make a difference, to pursue a social vision, to better oneself and society) and the relative powerlessness of professional practice creates disillusionment. According to Schmidt, graduate and professional schools are intellectual "boot camps" that systematically grind down students' spirit and ultimately produce obedient, rather than independent thinkers.

Timid Professionals

In Part One, "Timid Professionals," Schmidt outlines his basic thesis, that university professors, executives, and other professionals are trained to reproduce the inherently conservative and non-questioning ideology of large corporations, universities, and government agencies. Rather than fostering creativity, autonomy, and personal empowerment, professional schools create a skilled group of individuals who learn to subordinate their own goals to the goals of the institution. He claims that professional training produces "servants, not critics" (p.175).

To qualify for professional training and employment, individuals must exercise what Schmidt calls "ideological discipline," the ability to approach work with creativity and enthusiasm, but without questioning or seriously challenging the overall conservative and socially reproductive goals of the institution or employer. He writes, "The resulting professional is an obedient thinker, an intellectual property whom employers can trust to experiment, theorize, innovate, and create safely within the confines of an assigned ideology. The political and intellectual timidity of today's most highly educated employees is no accident." (p. 16)

One intriguing aspect of this book is Schmidt's definition of the commonly used but rarely defined word, "professional." He cautions against confusing the term with "white collar worker," and claims that most white collar workers today are non-professionals. He categorizes lawyers, teachers, counselors, nurses, doctors, engineers, scientists, professors, actors, and executives as professionals. He excludes from his definition of professionals those who hire and fire professionals (e.g., upper level-executives) as well as para-professionals such as clerical workers, paralegals and teachers' aides. What distinguishes a professional, he claims, is not just advanced knowledge and technical skill, but advanced *schooling* or "paper credentials." Professionals are a product of the schools.

Schmidt challenges the popular belief that professionals are independent practitioners, such as self-employed doctors or lawyers. He writes that the overwhelming majority of professionals (i.e., 8 out of 9) are salaried employees rather than independent practitioners. Thus, when writing about professionals, he has salaried employees in mind. Schmidt also critiques the widespread belief that today's professionals embody neutrality. Arguing that professionals are indeed politically committed, Schmidt writes, "Many people naively think of professionals as nonprofessionals who possess additional technical knowledge or technical skills. Professionals do exercise technical skills, of course, but it is their use of political skills that distinguishes them from nonprofessionals. The product of professional labor is political. It takes sides." (p. 41)

From Schmidt's perspective, professionals' own view of *themselves* as politically neutral supports their political commitments. By posing as disinterested experts, professionals actually serve the interests of the dominant class.

Schmidt also examines popular misconceptions about professional work. In the section, "Assignable Curiosity," he demonstrates that professionals—university professors in particular—have much less control over their own research than is generally thought. He describes how the needs of major corporations and government agencies drive university research. In particular, he discusses the profound influence of government grants in determining what researchers choose to study.

Another popular and powerful notion that Schmidt refutes is the belief that more highly educated people tend to be more creative, independent, and liberal. In making this argument he draws an important distinction between being conservative or liberal in one's personal beliefs, which have little social impact, and being conservative or liberal in the beliefs one acts upon at work. The latter, Schmidt contends, have the greatest social impact, and it is in this arena that many seemingly liberal and left-leaning professionals (such as university professors) are surprisingly conservative. Claiming that the academy is an essentially conservative institution, Schmidt cites the Chronicle of Higher Education finding that only 5% of professors identify themselves as "radical" or "left" of the political mainstream.

Examining the Examinations

Central to the production of ideologically correct professionals

are mechanisms for selecting and excluding candidates for the programs that eventually qualify individuals for professional work. In the chapters, "Ugly Scene at the Narrow Gate," "Examining the Examination," and "Gratuitous Bias," Schmidt provides an in-depth look at the ways professional workers are selected.

The first of the selection mechanisms is the process by which students are chosen for admission to graduate programs and to advanced stages of graduate study. In particular, Schmidt focuses on the standardized tests administered prior to admission to graduate school and the comprehensive faculty-developed tests administered in order to admit graduate students to advanced course work or dissertation candidacy.

He explains that tests, rather than assessing knowledge and creativity, actually measure students' ability to alienate themselves from authentic learning. Students who take the time to reason out problems in a creative way often fail to perform well on timed, standardized tests. These tests tend to privilege rote memory, speed, and close interpretations of text. According to Schmidt, standardized tests serve to screen out students who have "inappropriate" values or inadequate "ideological discipline" (p.170.)

The tests' instructions to pick the "best" answer means that the successful student is the one who either shares the testers' values or senses those valued and adopts them for the examination.... This unconscious ideological discipline that the latter approach represents is the preprofessional's first step toward the more developed ideological discipline that characterizes the professional. (p.170)

Schmidt claims that faculty members typically use comprehensive exams, which are usually not standardized, to "weed out" unsatisfactory students—those who delve too deeply into a particular topic, don't show enough "general knowledge," or answer questions in ways that professors deem unsuitable. Citing the field of physics in particular, Schmidt tells the story of one student who was dedicated to making his comprehensive examination a creative and useful experience. Unlike most students, this student studied books rather than old tests. He studied creative and non-traditional ways to solve traditional physics problems. Rather than being rewarded for his devotion to learning, he failed the exam, was subsequently barred from registering for classes, and was fired from his job as a teaching assistant.

From Schmidt's perspective, students who perform well on standardized tests and comprehensive exams demonstrate that they are willing to "jump through the hoops" of graduate school. These students

are willing to spend time and money preparing for standardized tests in order to gain entrance to graduate programs. Once admitted, they are willing to spend hundreds of hours studying for comprehensive exams on which they hope to provide answers that are pleasing to their professors. Schmidt claims that studying for comprehensive exams in graduate school serves as important preparation for other types of marathon efforts later in the professional career. He quotes a tenured professor of Physics, who explained that the important qualities of a physicist are "discipline in work and tenacity to stick to problems" rather than technical knowledge or creativity. Thus, the testing system tends to favor the students who will eventually make the most "manageable employees—students with a subordinate attitude and mainstream values" (p.160).

Graduate School: Cult Indoctrination?

One of the most compelling and provocative discussions in the book is the author's examination of the experience of graduate school. In this examination, Schmidt draws parallels between graduate school programs and cult indoctrination. Elaborating the thesis that professional schools serve more to indoctrinate than to teach technical skills, Schmidt details how graduate students are subjected to crushing reading loads, mindless grunt work in labs, and mind-numbing tasks of memorization. In addition, he describes the ways that students' experiences resemble those of individuals being initiated into a cult. Like new cult members, graduate students are often isolated from friends and family, they are placed in the hands of an elite group of "experts," whose judgments they must accept uncritically, and they are asked to devote nearly all their time and energy to "the cause."

Drawing on data from his interviews with graduate students, Schmidt identifies themes common to both the cult and the graduate school experience:

- Big Promises (recruitment promises and dreams of increased power and independence);
- Milieu Control (lack of outside social life, long working hours for little or no pay, little or no time for critical examination of the group's ideology);
- Unquestioned Authority (inability to challenge the opinions and practices of the experts in charge);
- Guilt Tripping and Shaming (members come to believe they are

- unworthy, both personally and professionally);
- Total Personal Exposure (exposure of all details of the member's life to the group);
- Scientific Dogma (the use of "sacred science" to legitimate the group's core values);
- Taking Away True Self-Confidence (belief by those in charge that the initiate's self-confidence stands in the way of his or her total commitment to the group); and
- The Only Path to Salvation (graduate school or the group is the individual's last chance for a better life.)

Schmidt does point out that professional training is not *always* like cult indoctrination. For example, he describes his own graduate experience as a "great and rewarding time" (p. 219). While acknowledging the positive features of his graduate study, Schmidt notes that many other students in his program "emerged looking and acting like broken versions of their former selves" (p. 219).

Resisting Indoctrination

In the final section of the book, Schmidt turns to the question of resistance. He discusses how graduate students, professors, and other professionals can resist the conformity of professional life. In the chapter titled, "How to Survive Professional Training With Your Values Intact," Schmidt draws on an unlikely source—the US Army Manual used to teach potential prisoners of war how to resist indoctrination. He writes, "In graduate school, as in the POW camp, the toughest struggle is not over whether you will survive the process, but over what sort of person you will be when you get out" (p.239).

Key to resisting indoctrination, writes the author, is organizing. The students he interviewed who successfully survived graduate-level professional training did so because they agitated for change, developed social and psychological supports outside of the institution, and spent time with like-minded individuals and groups. According to Schmidt, students who try to resist the system on their own are rarely successful, usually succumbing to pressures to change their own values and practices.

The final chapter, "Now or Never," outlines how professionals in all fields can maintain a sense of integrity and purpose within the mainstream workplace. As Schmidt points out, making a difference and working for social change do not require one to be employed by a non-

profit, reform-oriented organization. What they do require, however, is that one take a stance as a "radical professional" (p.265). Such a professional continually critiques the social role of the institution and system for which he or she works. In addition, radical professionals understand and question their place as workers within a conservative system, and they refuse to buy into the mystique of the independent, self-directed professional. To remain a radical professional requires ongoing effort, one that incorporates a variety of strategies, such as dropping the use of elitist titles (e.g., "Doctor" and "Professor"), building coalitions between professionals and non-professionals, and reading non-mainstream and radical journals.

Reproduction and Resistance

Schmidt offers a powerful examination of the relationship between professional life, professional schooling, and the perpetuation of social and political hierarchies. Its arguments unmask the subtle conservatism and indoctrination endemic to professional training as well as to professional employment. Ultimately, the book succeeds in laying out a strong case for the radicalization of professionals. Whereas most critical studies of education focus on social reproduction in elementary and secondary schools, Schmidt's analysis examines how these mechanisms play out in graduate education and induction into the professional career.

As with many analyses based on social reproduction theories, Schmidt's examination tends to over-generalize. He does include some examples of student experiences from other fields, but by basing his observations largely on just one field (i.e., his own field of physics), he seems to imply that all graduate education is equally conservative, demanding of personal compromise, and inhospitable to a diversity of views.

The book would also benefit from the inclusion of other voices. I wanted to hear from graduate students in disciplines other than physics, and I was looking for narratives about resistance. In particular, I wanted to hear stories from students who had resisted the system completely and chosen different paths altogether.

These are minor points, however, compared to the central weakness of the book, namely Schmidt's failure to address questions of methodology. Although he uses powerful examples presumably collected from interviews with students, Schmidt never explains how he went about collecting this information. Despite the fact that the book

was intended for a mainstream audience, the author still should have provided some discussion of the theoretical framework guiding his work and the methods used to accomplish it.

Another problem is Schmidt's inattention to the actual experiences of practicing professionals—both those who conform and those who resist. While providing examples of how students resist conformity in graduate school, he seems to ignore examples of how currently employed professionals offer resistance. This important oversight leaves the reader with the impression that all professionals are hapless cogs in the machinery of social reproduction. Discussion of the types of resistance undertaken by practicing professionals would have offered support for the recommendations presented at the end of the book.

Finally, Schmidt's analysis would have been improved if it had drawn on relevant theory. For example, he might have used feminist theory to consider the ways marginalized groups in the academy have resisted domination. Work by feminist philosopher, Jane Roland Martin addresses some of these issues quite poignantly. Schmidt would have strengthened his arguments by connecting them to related theoretical interpretations offered by feminists such as Martin or neo-Marxists such as Jean Anyon.

Despite some significant weaknesses, *Disciplined Minds* still offers a powerful analysis of the impact of professional work on our minds and hearts. Moreover, Schmidt offers concrete suggestions helpful to fellow travelers who feel trapped by "the system." These suggestions enable us to reaffirm and act upon the original commitment we made to use our life's work to promote social good.

About the Reviewer

Andi O'Connor is Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies in the Department of Educational Studies at Ohio University. She is currently studying the relationship between masculinities, peer group relations, and school violence. Her research interests include critical qualitative studies of gender, queer theory, and radical theories of education.

